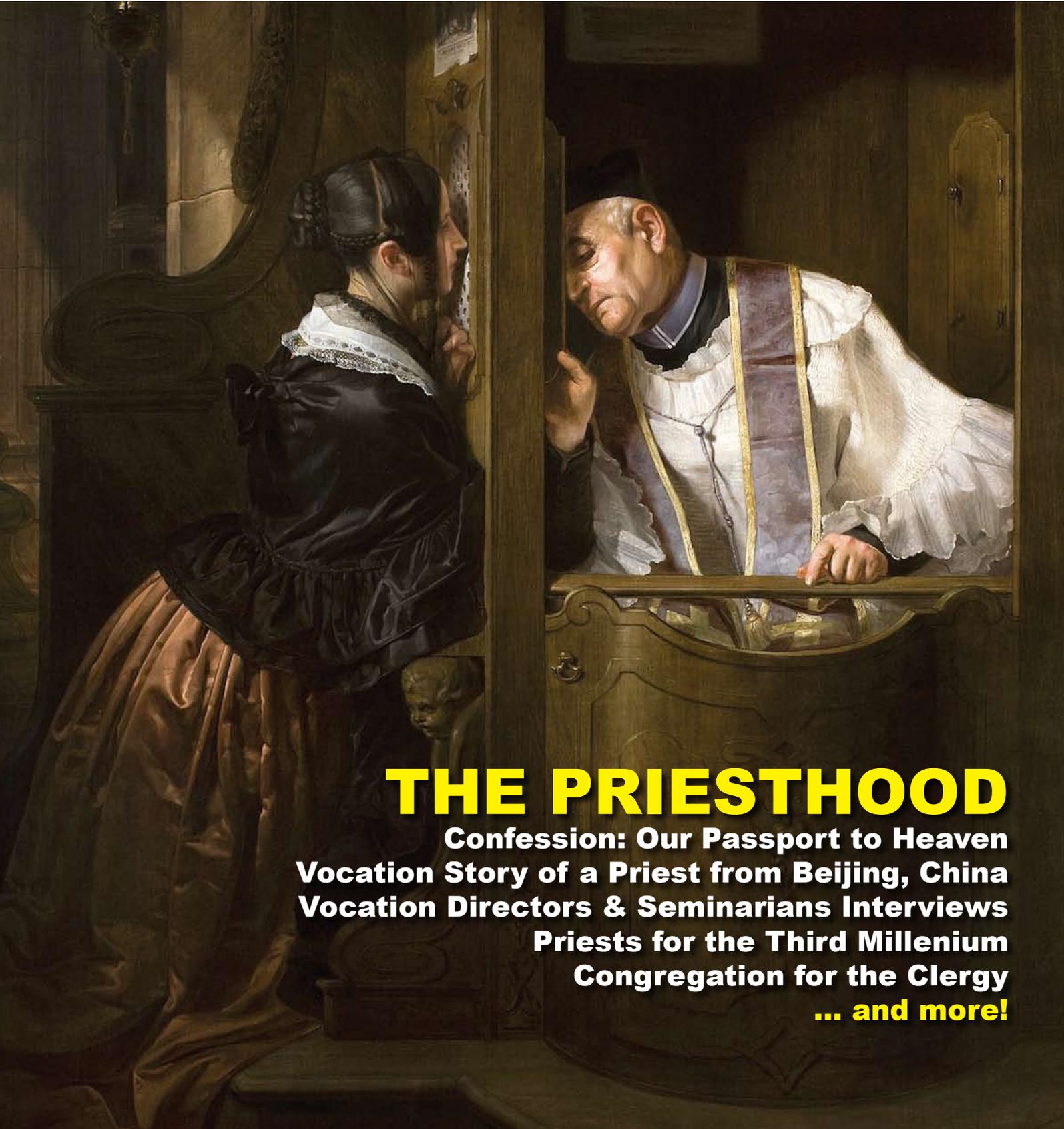


Serra+Connects

Connecting Serra Clubs Around the World + Abiding as One in Christ

Issue No. 8 • September-October 2013



THE PRIESTHOOD

Confession: Our Passport to Heaven
Vocation Story of a Priest from Beijing, China
Vocation Directors & Seminarians Interviews
Priests for the Third Millennium
Congregation for the Clergy
... and more!

My Dear Fellow Serrans,

May the love and peace of our Lord be with you.

I was baptized in 1993 and hence this is my 20th year as a Catholic. I remember it was through a series of hard knocks that I finally signed up for the "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults" (RCIA) classes. Initially, the thought of going for weekly RCIA classes in the evening seemed like it was going to take eternity for me to complete the course. But, as I got to know more about the Catholic faith from the priest who conducted the classes, I began to appreciate the presence of God in the Sacraments that Jesus instituted for us.

I am sure all of us are very grateful for our priests, without whom we will not be able to receive the Sacraments, which are so essential for the salvation of all souls. Hence, we have chosen the priesthood as the theme of this issue. In this issue, we revisit the essential role of priests in the Catholic Church from a theological perspective, reminding us of our calling, as Serrans, to pray for more vocations to the priesthood.

We also feature the vocation stories of Rev. Fr. Peter Zhang, C.D.D. and Rev. Fr. Ryan Rooney. Fr. Peter Zhang, the vice-general of the Congregatio Discipulorum Domini (a religious order founded by Celso Cardinal Costantini in China that provides special pastoral services for the Chinese residing in China and overseas), shares how growing up during the very trying times of the Cultural Revolution in China shaped his vocation and led him to answer God's call to serve as a priest. Fr. Ryan Rooney from the Diocese of Springfield, MA, shares the struggles he went through in his discernment during his college years and reflects on how Blessed Pope John Paul II had been a role model and a source of inspiration for him.

I believe the many inspiring stories and reflections presented in this issue of Serra Connects will set your hearts ablaze. As a follow-up to this issue on the priesthood, and as a testimony to the contributions of our priests, I exhort Serrans from all over the world to contribute an article on how a priest has made a significant impact on their lives. You can email your articles to info@serra.org. We shall feature them in the next issue of Serra Connects.

Lastly, I am pleased to welcome the new SI Executive Director – John Liston to the Serra family. More details on John Liston can be found on page 3 of this issue of Serra Connects.

I conclude with the words of St. Paul to the Colossians (4:2), "Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving". As we thank the Lord for the gift of the priesthood and for all our priests, let us continue to pray for our priests and for more vocations to the priesthood, for "the harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38)

May He continue to bless you and your loved ones abundantly.

Thank you.

Mary, Mother of Vocations, pray for us!

Yours sincerely in Christ,
Sean Yeo
President, Serra International
Editor, Serra Connects

Contents

SI's New Executive Director - 3

Confession: Our Passport to Heaven - 4

St. Pio and Confession - 7

Many Coals Keep the Fire Hot (by Jon C. Haines) - 9

The Priesthood (by Fr. John A. Hardon) - 10

Journeying with the Lord (by Fr. Peter Zhang) - 13

**I knew I wanted to be a Diocesan Priest
(by Fr. Ryan Rooney) - 18**

SI and the Congregation for the Clergy - 19

Vocation Director Interview: **Fr. Paul C. Hoelsing - 20**

Vocation Director Interview: **Fr. Tim Hepburn - 21**

Seminarian Interview: **Christopher Peschel - 22**

Seminarian Interview: **Juan Villegas - 23**

Resources: **Priests for the Third Millennium - 24**

New Executive Director for Serra International



Serra International is pleased to announce the appointment of Mr. John Liston as its new Executive Director taking over the helm from Mr. John Woodward effective 3 September 2013.

Mr. Liston is no stranger to the Serra world, having previously worked for Serra in different capacities since 1999. He began working for Serra as an intern when he was just 15 years old while attending Archbishop Quigley Preparatory High School Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. Mr. Liston's work with Serra continued during his studies at the University of South Carolina's Moore School of Business. He graduated from the Moore School with honors after completing a triple major in International Business, Human Resources Management, and Entrepreneurship.

After completing his undergraduate work, Mr. Liston was hired by Hewitt Associates (now Aon Hewitt) as a benefits analyst. Serra International had an opportunity to bring Mr. Liston back aboard as Administrator in 2008. He worked for Serra on a full-time basis for three years while pursuing his Juris Doctorate degree as an evening student from Loyola University Chicago School

of Law. During his fourth and final year of law school, Mr. Liston worked as a law clerk for both Sanchez Daniels & Hoffman LLP and Regina P. Etherton & Associates, LLC. After graduating from Loyola and gaining admission to the Illinois Bar, Mr. Liston was hired as an associate attorney by Sanchez Daniels & Hoffman LLP in November of 2012.

Additionally, Mr. Liston serves as a coach for Loyola's Negotiation Team and as an adjunct professor for several classes in Loyola's negotiation program.

Mr. Liston is very excited to work for Serra again and looks forward to continuing the organization's vital work of encouraging priestly vocations throughout the world and helping Serrans everywhere respond to their own personal calls to holiness. Likewise, we at Serra are blessed to have Mr. Liston back with the organization as its Executive Director in these challenging times.

We would also like to thank Mr. John Woodward for his 12 years of service with Serra. Our best wishes and prayers are with Mr. Woodward that the Lord will bless him in all his undertakings.

Confession

Our Passport to Heaven



A priest once wrote, Confession (or the Sacrament of Reconciliation) is our passport to heaven. But how many of us avail ourselves of this powerful Sacrament frequently, at least once a month? Admittedly, even regular churchgoers shy away from regular confessions yet receive the Body of Christ in Holy Communion every Sunday.

In the story of St. Pio featured on page 7, we read that the focal points in his priestly ministry were that of the Holy Eucharist and Confession and the powerful testimonies of those who have benefited from the sanctifying grace of a confession well made.

Even those of us who make frequent and regular confessions at least once a month, do we fall into the trap of making a bad confession? It is possible. This is especially so when we do not have a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes sin. This is further compounded when we are ignorant of the Church's teachings or even the Ten Commandments. If we were given a surprise test on what the Ten Commandments are, many of us might be surprised by our own inability to list them without faltering.

What is sin?

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8:34). In essence, sin is a disdainful rejection of God's infinite love for us, what He has done for us and what He stands for. It means ignoring the immense love with which God, the Father created us, the high cost at which Jesus Christ, God the Son redeemed us

and God's laws and commandments which He has given us to guide ourselves safely back to Himself. It means voluntarily putting a distance between ourselves and God and separating ourselves from Him. Trivialising our sins, numbing our conscience and hardening our hearts build a high wall between God and our souls, destroy ideals, put out the desire for holiness, and prevent us from becoming our full potential that God made us to be, and result in lives that are not fully happy or fulfilled.

For a sin to exist three conditions must be fulfilled: (1) that thought, word, desire, deed or omission is evil or believed to be evil; (2) to realize that it offends God and (3) to do it fully aware that one is committing evil. However, we should not conclude that it would be better not to know the laws of God at all. In such a case, we will be responsible for our ignorance and the sins committed as a result of it.

Who does the sinner wound?

The sinner wounds God's honor and love, his own human dignity as a man called to be a son of God, and the spiritual well-being of the Church, of which each Christian ought to be a living stone. (CCC 1487). To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world. (CCC 1488).

In short, the sinner wounds God, himself and others.

Why do so few of us recognize the gravity of sin?

For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly

hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them (Matthew 13:15). Our human weaknesses, pride, self-love, lack of sincerity, lack of desire to grow in personal holiness benumb our conscience, and lead to spiritual laziness and apathy in not fully understanding the gravity of sin and putting up with it.

We see in our churches today lines and lines of the faithful receiving Holy Communion but oftentimes hardly a line forms outside a Confessional. The reason so few of us recognize the gravity of sin lies in the yardstick that we use. In this, we choose to look at it in relation to ourselves instead of to God. In our eyes a fault is serious or small depending on the personal impression that this fault produces in us. Thus, we use a personal standard established by our pride by which to judge the gravity of a sin against God. We forget that the seriousness of a sin does not depend on how we feel against it but how far such an offence against God's infinite goodness and love takes us away from Him, the One who worked so hard to redeem us from our sins, and the only One who can truly make us happy.

We forget that our sins wound not only ourselves but also the mystical Body of Christ, His Church and the world. The poor state of the world today is the result of a collective effect of the sins of humankind as people choose to concentrate on themselves and ignore God.

A person inured to sin has a conscience that is numbed to sin. This can be easily seen in the case of a person who for the first time missed a Mass on a day of obligation. At first he will feel greatly disturbed but if he does not correct himself and instead falls into the unfortunate habit of missing Masses on days of obligation, then he will feel less and less disturbed with every subsequent Mass missed without a good reason. However, his subsequent lack of disturbed feelings does not take out even an iota of gravity from this offence. *This leads to the question of whether our consciences are properly formed and delicate enough to provide us with the proper alert and warning against sins.*

What makes a bad confession?

While many of us strive to make a sincere confession, chances are that our confession can still be badly done if we are guilty of any of the following:

1. Failure to examine our conscience and check our behavior, thoughts, words and actions against the Ten Commandments, and teachings of the Church on morals and obligations as baptized Catholics.
2. Failure to pray for the Holy Spirit to help shed light on



our faults and hidden sins.

3. Having no repentance, true sorrow for our sins or purpose of amendment.
4. Concealing or with-holding any serious sin during confession. This will render the confession invalid and make us incur a new sin of sacrilege.
5. Having a lax attitude towards fulfilling the penance prescribed.

Saints wept for their sins.

Saints due to their closeness with God, have a good understanding of God's divine love, and frequently wept for their sins. They understand how even a venial sin offends against God's infinite goodness and love. When we offend a person whom we love, the greater the love that person holds for us, the greater the gravity of our offense. Many Saints felt the need to make frequent Confessions. Among the many who confessed weekly are Mother Theresa and our beloved Pope John Paul II. The Saints went way out to remove whatever that stood in the way of their relationship with God. We should emulate the Saints in their sincerity of their relationship with God.

Jesus gave power to His apostles to forgive sins

He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:22-23).

Jesus was so concerned about our human frailty that the first thing He did after resurrection was to give power to His apostles to forgive sins – the institution of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Such a wondrous gift! This is the route

Jesus points out to us for seeking forgiveness of our sins. Confessing one's sins to another mortal requires humility that Jesus wants to see present in the hearts of His disciples. Telling our sins to the Confessor allows time for gravity of the sins to sink in and provides the opportunity to confront our sins squarely in the presence of the Lord in the Confessor. The joy of actually hearing that one's sins are forgiven and thus certainty of pardon by God can only be experienced by those who take this route in seeking forgiveness from God.

Jesus to St. Faustina on Divine Mercy:

*"Write of My Mercy. Tell all souls that in the court of the mercy (i.e. the Confessional) is where they should look for consolation; there the greatest miracles take place constantly and they are repeated incessantly. In order to obtain this miracle it is not necessary to make a pilgrimage to a distant place nor to celebrate some other rites, all you need is to approach with faith My representative and to confess to him with faith its misery; and the miracle of the Mercy of God will become evident. Even if a soul was like a corpse in such a way that from the human viewpoint everything was lost and nothing could be done. It is not thus for God. **The miracle of the Divine Mercy restores that soul in all its fullness.** Oh unfortunate souls that do not enjoy this miracle of the Divine Mercy; they will request it in vain when it is too late."*

Atonement for our sins in this life and after death in Purgatory

Purgatory exists for the purification of a soul that died having repented of its sins but without having made full satisfaction for its sins. The patient bearing of the trials, sufferings and sorrows that God sends us in our daily life helps make satisfaction for our repented and confessed sins. Thus, from the Christian's perspective everything that happens to us whether it be a sickness, or a disappointment or a trial is nothing more than God's manifestation of His love for us, His purification of us in order that we be prepared to join Him in heaven in the shortest possible time.

Striving for Holiness

Frequent confession is indispensable for growth in personal holiness. The soul that is dead through sin will again be brought back to fullness of life by the sanctifying grace that is poured into the soul during Confession. Additionally we also receive sacramental grace which helps us in the process of personal sanctification. Thus,

it is important that we make frequent Confessions at least once a month or more frequently as needed. Confessions made with the right dispositions will never become a routine but will always constitute a joyful encounter with the Lord.

Satan would very much like us to think that sin is trivial and he has already won half the battle if we do not attach importance to Confession as a great and necessary help in our growth in personal holiness. Not availing of frequent Confessions results in us being slaves to sin, as the Lord has warned us (cf. John 8:34). Since the Lord has already won freedom for us at great price and cost to Himself, we should not trivialise sin and fall back into slavery through our own ignorance, complacency or spiritual apathy and laziness. The Lord has done the 99.9%. Let us do the 0.1% with love, peace and joy!

The spiritual effects of a good Confession are: (CCC 1496)

- reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace;
- reconciliation with the Church;
- remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins;
- remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin;
- peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation;
- an increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle.

Be Happy and Holy Always

The Lord wants us to be happy (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:16) and holy (cf. Matthew 5:48) always. But how can we be really happy if we are not holy? How can we have real peace and joy if we separate ourselves from the Lord with our unrepented and unconfessed sins? How can we walk in the righteousness of the Lord and attain the fullest potential God has planned for us if after all that our Lord has done for us, we remain in slavery to our own sins?

Reference

How to Make a Good Confession – An Introduction to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation by Fr. Francisco Luna



St. Pio and the Sanctifying Power of Confession

On 23 September, we celebrate the Feast of St. Pio, (popularly known as Padre Pio). There are many books written about the numerous miracles wrought through Padre Pio's prayers and his priestly ministry while he was alive. In fact, Padre Pio's own life was and still is a great miraculous testimony of the power of God, the power conferred on the priest and the power of the Sacraments of the Catholic Church.

St. Pio lived with the Stigmata (the Holy Wounds of Christ) for 50 years of his life and he remains the only Saint who was a priest with the Stigmata. Often, people would bring up the fact that St. Francis of Assisi was also afflicted with the Stigmata. However though the latter was the first recorded stigmatic in Christian history, he was not an ordained priest.

As a child, Padre Pio was named Francesco, born to a peasant family, in the small Italian village of Pietrelcina on 25 May 1887. Francesco was very devout as a child, and felt drawn to the priesthood at an early age. Grazio Maria Forgione and Maria Giuseppa De Nunzio, the parents of Padre Pio were known to serve God before work, leisure, or personal desires. Neighbors called them the "God-Is-Everything Family.", a simple formula of how to raise Saints and foster vocations.

Prayer is the key which opens God's Heart

He became a Capuchin novice at the age of 16 and received the habit in 1902. He was known for his humility and great love for prayer. He passed the day and a large part of the night in conversation with God. He would say: "In books we seek God, in prayer we find Him. Prayer is the key which opens God's Heart."

The altar and the confessional were the two focal points of his life. His Mass could last one and a half hours or more, due to the long pauses of contemplation as he entered into various parts of the Holy Sacrifice. The spiritual intensity with which he celebrated Mass spoke of how deeply he was living the Passion of Christ. Holy Mass was the high point of his whole day, for it was his moment of closest union with Jesus, Priest and Victim. He felt called to share Christ's agony that will continue until the end of the world.

In John 20: 21-23: *Jesus said to them (His Apostles) again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* We see in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus conferring the power to forgive sins upon His Apostles. The power to forgive sins conferred upon priests validly ordained by a bishop would play a prominent role in the life and miracles of Padre Pio. According to one estimate, Padre Pio heard a total of approximately five million confessions in his lifetime.

Confession – a Focal Point in Padre Pio's Priestly Ministry

Like St. John Vianney, he would spend an average of 15 hours a day hearing confessions. In the confessional, Padre Pio would not avoid using harsh and shocking language especially for habitual sinners and cases of scandal and impurity. His severe attitude was to make penitents conscious of the gravity of sins. As a result many repented with firmer resolution to improve their spiritual lives.

Padre Pio once told a priest: "If you knew fully what a fearful thing it is to sit in the tribunal of the confessional! We are administering the Blood of Christ. We must be careful that we do not fling it about by being too easy-going or negligent."

So many people wanted Padre Pio to hear their confessions that they generally had to wait two to three weeks before their turn came. The number of people became so large that it was necessary to open an office to give tickets out. The tickets were numbered; they indicated where people were in line for Padre Pio's confessional.

People flocked to Padre Pio for confession because there were many testimonies of how he was able to read souls and helped sincere penitents benefit from the sanctifying power of the Sacrament of Confession which set souls free from the slavery of sins and transformed their lives.

Padre Pio demanded that each confession be a true conversion. He didn't tolerate a lack of honesty in the explanation of sins. He was very hard on those who made

excuses, spoke insincerely, or lacked a firm resolution to change. He demanded frankness and total honesty from the penitent. He also required a true and sincere sorrow of heart, and an absolute firmness in a person's resolutions for the future. One person in confession questioned the very existence of Hell. Padre Pio responded, "You will believe it when you get there."

An unbelieving Communist also came to Padre Pio for confession. At the time he still hadn't abandoned his evil beliefs. Padre Pio chased him out of the confessional, saying: "What are you doing in front of God's tribunal if you don't believe? Go! Go away! You are a Communist!"

Many of Padre Pio's penitents shared the same experience of the awesome impression of being before the judgment Seat of God when in the confessional. If the penitent wasn't honest or just read through the list of his or her sins without the firm resolution to change, Padre Pio would often growl "get out."

A man by the name of Andre Mandato spoke about the time he went to confession to Padre Pio: "I had been going to church every Sunday but I had no strong belief in confession. I went very seldom. I started to believe in confession only after I went to Padre Pio. The first time I confessed to him, he told me what sins I had committed."

Don Nello Castello, a priest from Padua, Italy, who had gone to confession to Padre Pio hundreds of times, recalled his incredible experiences: "I went to confession to Padre Pio at least a hundred times. I recall the first time, his words both jolted and enlightened me. The counsels he gave me reflected exact knowledge of my whole life both past and future. At times he would surprise me with suggestions unconnected with the sins confessed. But later events made it clear that his counsel had been prophetic. In one confession in 1957, he spoke five times with insistence on the same question, using different words, and reminding me of an ugly fault of impatience. Furthermore, he enlightened me on the underlying causes that provoked the impatience. He described to me the behavior I should follow to avoid impatience in the future. This happened without my having said a word about the problem. Thus he knew my problems better than I did and advised me how to correct them."

Among those who came to see Padre Pio, there were professed unbelievers. Some of them came to see him out of curiosity, others to mock both Padre Pio and God. Two Freemasons, who were bitterly opposed to God and the Catholic Church, decided to make mock confessions to Padre Pio of sins they simply made up. Their goal was to desecrate the Sacrament of Confession. These men went to him at separate times. As they began to confess their made-up sins, Padre Pio stopped them, told them he knew what they were doing, and then began to tell each of them their real sins, as well as the time, the place and how they committed them. The two men were so overwhelmed that a few days later they repented of their sinful lives and converted.



Padre Pio considered going to confession frequently to be something necessary for growth in the spiritual life. He went to confession at least once a week. He never wanted his spiritual children to go without confession more than ten days.

One time Padre Pio was asked: "We confess everything that we can remember or know, but perhaps God sees other things that we cannot recall?" He responded: "If we put into [our confession] all our good will and we have the intention to confess [all mortal sins]... all that we can know or remember – the mercy of God is so great that He will include and erase even what we cannot remember or know." For this reason one should say at the end of a confession, "and I confess any sins that I may have forgotten and did not mention in this confession."

Padre Pio commented on the amount of confessions he heard, and how he was able to do it: "There have been periods when I heard confessions without interruption for eighteen hours consecutively. I don't have a moment to myself. But God helps me effectively in my ministry. I feel the strength to renounce everything, so long as souls return to Jesus and love Jesus."

Worn out by over 50 years of intense suffering and a life totally dedicated to prayer and to the ministry of reconciliation and spiritual direction, Padre Pio was called to his heavenly reward on 23 September 1968. Upon his death, his wounds were healed as he had predicted 50 years earlier. On 16 June 2002, over 500,000 faithful gathered in Rome to witness Pope John Paul II proclaim Padre Pio, Saint Pio of Pietrelcina – arguably one of the Church's greatest and most well-known.

Today the incorrupt body of St. Pio of Pietrelcina is encased in a glass reliquary placed at the site of his tomb, in the center of the lower basement of the church dedicated to the Saint at San Giovanni, Rotondo, Italy.

Many Coals Together Keep the Fire Hot

By Jon C. Haines



The World Youth Day is an event which is becoming famed around the world even in secular circles for gathering millions of youth. As I heard more about it while the year went on, I had an anxiety, a feeling that I should go but didn't want to go through the hassle of paying the cost and using vacation time. However, when two friendly Serrans, Roberto Sobral and Affonso Iannone, offered a place to stay and to introduce me to their Clubs, that became a small price to pay for a wonderful experience of the Church in South America.

I went to Brazil for the first time expecting chaos and lots of Catholic people. I found both of those and much more. Though the event itself could have been better organized due to unexpected flooding moving its location at the last minute, warm and welcoming Brazilians were to be found flooding every corner of Rio.

The most important events of World Youth Day were the *Via Sacra*, the Vigil on Saturday night and the Mass with our new Holy Father on Sunday, all of which were very difficult to navigate through the crowds. The excitement on the streets hours before each event took place was spectacular as suddenly, once mixed and wandering groups of people formed torrential rivers flowing southwest through each street block of the city towards the ocean. Most groups were with flags, drums, chants, zealous holy card and rosary distributors. I, being by myself, managed to hand off a several hundred "Serran Prayer for Vocations/Info" cards, but this was a drop in the bucket. The rivers increased by the minute and when they reached Copacabana beach they came to a near standstill as if they reached the ocean. There were a few times where I ended up nearly 300 meters in the opposite direction of where I was trying to go due to the undercurrent. Though the sheer number of people at each event made it difficult for most to pay attention to the scarcely placed speakers, that didn't stop the positive attitude of the people there. Any other crowd in such heat would have rioted.

However I think the most important part of World Youth Day, besides Christ's Presence in the sacraments, was neither the pope nor the organization of the events, but rather the informal and unofficial part. That is, the presence of so many Christians in one place. This fact alone testifies to the world and to those participating that they are not alone in their belief in Christ. They may be despised by the world¹, but they are not alone.

Walking around during these events I can easily see why so many vocations (and conversions) are born from World Youth Days. I've never seen so many cassocks amidst a crowd in my life. Each collar or habit was a witness to a noble way of life for the millions present who had not yet made a vocational decision. Not surprisingly, this is an analogy with Christ's way of teaching and feeding us by the sacraments "an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give us grace." In addition to being a

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:28

distributor of grace helping our fallen nature, each sacrament is a *sign* like the wedding ring or collar. It is a sign (reminder) of God's love for us where He came to help us even after we disobeyed him at the fall of man. Perhaps the ultimate sign of God's love for us is the crucifix. Without digressing too much, even though Christ never held a crucifix, wore a collar or used the rite of absolution, we find that these signs have legitimately developed to represent a greater reality that was there when Christ Himself walked the earth.

In the same way, each collar or habit was a witness to a way of life for the millions present who have not yet made a vocational decision to discern whether they are called to take on the "higher calling."² Just as for a married person, wearing a wedding ring communicates to onlookers that he or she has committed to someone very special, so too these thousands of "cloth wedding rings" glowed fiery red to the youth present at an even higher temperature saying, "My relationship with Christ is so important to me that I have forgone an intimate human relationship to dedicate my life to Him and His Church. He is my love." How can those there not wonder whether they want to take on the same sign? This was rather obvious in the eyes of those youth looking at their leaders as examples of how to act like Christ. In the same way that the religious habit was a visible sign to the youth of the viability of the Christian way of life, the visible presence of nearly 3 million youth there was a sign to the rest of the world of Christianity's fire still burning today.

This brings me to my final point which is that, besides the fire itself, the relationship between the laity and the priests played out on a very visible level. I think almost everyone there noticed that there seemed to be a relationship between how visible, excited, passionate and apostolic the specific group of youth was (as described above - perhaps even a correlation with how many holy cards distributed) and the number of visible priests or religious that led each group. It reminded me of how the famed monasteries of Europe which were originally by themselves in the country caused towns to grow around them and prosper both in living the Christian faith and economically. Good always causes prosperity.

In terms of measurable events before the World Youth Day even ended, at both the Neocatechumenal Way and Opus Dei rallies, vocation 'calls' took place where over six thousand came forward to offer their lives to be a priest or religious brother or sister. Though I was present at neither I could see the effect the voyage was having on those present each day. For most people, the experience has to sink in a bit more before they make a life choice. As many people say, years after a World Youth Day, that city is never the same. I believe the same will be true for Rio.

² Subjectively, it is not a higher calling because not everyone is called. However, objectively or ontologically, it is a higher state: see Trent Session 24, Canon X, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 915, 916.

The Priesthood

Rev. Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.



The late Rev. Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., (1914-2000) was an American Jesuit priest, prolific writer and theologian, known to be devoted to Eucharistic Adoration and a strong proponent of traditional Catholic teachings. He has authored over 40 books, including "Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Catholic Church". He founded several Catholic organizations, including Inter Mirifica (a name taken from Vatican II's decree on social communication). Here, Serra Connects brings you a transcript from a retreat that the late Fr. Hardon (Spiritual Director and Retreat Master) gave to the Handmaids of the Precious Blood (www.nunsforpriests.org) in 1977 on "The Priesthood". The latter are cloistered contemplatives offering their lives for the sanctification of priests in Eucharistic Adoration. Founded in 1947, the Handmaids of the Precious Blood also run an "Adopt a Priest" program whereby any practicing Catholic can request to adopt up to three priests. Anonymity is maintained between the priest(s) and the person praying for him (them). The name(s) of the priest(s) are sent together with a prayer card to use daily when praying for him (them). So far they have 29,800 lay people who have "adopted" priests.

This article is reproduced here with the kind permission of Inter Mirifica.

What is the priesthood? Before dealing at length with the meaning of the priesthood in the Catholic Church, there is value in first looking at the priesthood in general, as revealed to us by God in the Sacred Scriptures, because today in so many circles there is such widespread confusion. People are being told that priests are really no different from the rest of the faithful. They are being told that at most priests are only ministers of the Gospel. Yet they have learned over the years that the priesthood is the sublimest dignity that God can confer on a human being.

Whatever happened to that sublimity when they see thousands of priests leaving the active priesthood, as they

say, to be laicized? In many countries, especially in North and South America, vocations to the priesthood are at an all time low. Large archdioceses have had as few as one ordination in four years. Some have had at least a few vocations; none have had many; but many have had almost none. Permanent deacons are being ordained in quantity, partly to supplement the dwindling ranks of the priesthood. But a deacon is not a priest. All of these and some other phenomena make the question we are asking ourselves crucially important. If the future of the Catholic Church in countries like the United States is to be assured, we need to understand better who a priest is, what his dignity is, and above all, appreciate his absolute indispensability for the people of God.

First then, let us look at the priesthood in the Old Testament revelation. As we read the pages of the Old Law, going back to the early history of Israel, we see that priests were an essential part of the chosen people. Their function was to act as mediators between the people and God. A priest was, therefore, first of all, a mediator. This concept has been refined, deepened, and expanded but not substantially changed from the Old Law to the New Law. He stood between the people whom he represented and the God whom he addressed.

Yet as we know in the Old Testament there were two kinds of mediators between God and the people. There were mediators from God to communicate His mind and His will to the people. These mediators were called prophets. The latter were from God to the people. We might call this downward mediation: from heaven to earth. There were also mediators from the people to God to offer Him the people's adoration, invoke His aid, and beg His mercy for the people's sins. These were in Old Testament parlance called priests. This was the upward mediation: from earth to heaven. Moreover, the priests of the Old Testament were not only to mediate from the people to God, they were to do so in a distinctive, indeed, unique way. They were to offer

“The priesthood is indeed important; without it there is no Church. Needless to say, the priesthood is challenged. The late Pope Paul VI more than once said that never in the history of the Church has the priestly office been more attacked than today. Hence, if ever the priesthood needed support—of the priests, first of all, of their fellow-priests, and of all the faithful through prayer and sacrifice—it is today.”

sacrifices (the plural is of the essence of the Old Law) of goats and sheep, of oxen and cattle, of bread and wine, of wheat, barley, and oats, and fruits of trees.

If the first function, therefore, of a priest was to be mediator from the people to God, his second function was to offer sacrifice. A priest, then, was a mediator who offered sacrifice. However, not everyone was allowed to exercise the priestly office. Only those specially chosen by Yahweh were permitted to offer sacrifice. When on one dramatic occasion, King Saul, as we recall, dared to arrogate to himself the offering of sacrifice, he was severely punished. It was in this context that the phrase was first spoken, “Obedience is better than sacrifice”. Saul was disobedient and God was displeased with his sacrifice because, though king, he was not a priest. He was not chosen for that office.

Thirdly, then, beyond being a mediator and beyond offering sacrifice, a priest was one specially chosen by God to do the mediation and to offer the oblation to God. In a word, a priest must be divinely chosen. No one presumed to be a priest on his own. So much for a thumbnail review of some two thousand years of Jewish prophetic and priestly history.

Let us consider the priesthood in Christianity. With the advent of Christ, the priesthood of the Old Law was elevated to the height it had never before possessed. It also became the cornerstone of the Christian religion so much so that we might almost define true Christianity as the religion of a divinely revealed priesthood. Christianity is indeed priestly and the priesthood is of its essence: no priesthood, no Christianity.

This priesthood of the New Law is really three kinds of

priesthood; all, however, take their origin from and depend on the Incarnation of the Son of God. There is, first of all, the priesthood of Jesus Christ. By His Incarnation, Jesus offered to His heavenly Father all the acts of His human will. Remember, a priest is one who offers. God could not offer to God. God had first to become man to make it possible for an oblation, or more accurately, a sacrifice to be offered. God had first to have a human will to make the priesthood possible.

Christ's priesthood, therefore, began in Mary's womb. He lived His priesthood during the nine hidden months within His mother, then through the many years at Nazareth, and while preaching and doing good throughout Palestine. But especially on the Cross did He live this priesthood, where He united all the acts of a mortal human being capable of suffering and of death into one supreme sacrifice, by which He became the Mediator par excellence between the human race and God, our Priest and Pontiff for a sinful mankind. Such was Christ's Priesthood in His mortal flesh on earth. But we are not finished. In fact, Christ's priesthood in a profound sense only began during His mortal sojourn which ended on Calvary. Jesus continues His Priesthood even now. He had better; otherwise, we could not have a Mass.

As our eternal High Priest He worships, praises, and thanks the divine majesty in His own Name and in the name of His people. But, though sinless Himself, He is head of a very sinful human family. So He intercedes before the Throne of the Father for us. Being heard by the Father, He keeps sending down blessings on us from His heavenly home. This Priesthood of Jesus Christ is the only one fundamental priesthood now in the Church. All other priesthoods are participations in this one. The participation takes place in two different ways. First and mainly, by those ordained to the ministerial priesthood and secondly, by all the faithful as belonging to the priesthood of the faithful.

We have, therefore, because of Christ's priesthood, first of all the ordained ministerial priesthood, which we identify with the sacrament of orders. Who belongs to this priesthood? All those who are of the sacerdotal rank: priests, bishops, and the Pope as their head. When did this participated ministerial priesthood of Jesus begin? It came into existence at the Last Supper when the Savior did two things. He first changed bread and wine into Himself and already offered, the night before He died, the death He would endure. Then He told the disciples to do what He did “in commemoration of Me”. It is a defined article of the Catholic Faith that the ordained ministerial priesthood, the sacrament of orders, was instituted personally by Jesus at the Last Supper.

Finally, beyond the ordained ministerial priesthood, which is unique and possessed only by those who receive the sacrament of orders, there is a true although subordinate

Consequently, not merely knowing about the priesthood, but praying and offering God sacrifices for the priesthood are indispensably important in our day.

sense in which all the baptized faithful belong to the Priesthood of Christ. We begin to share in the Priesthood of the Savior when we are baptized into the Priesthood of Christ. This sacramental character which we receive at Baptism is deepened by the Sacrament of Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. It is because of this sharing in Christ's Priesthood that the faithful are able to receive any of the other sacraments; without this one no other sacrament can be received. It is because of this share in Christ's Priesthood that they are enabled to offer with the priest at the altar the Body and Blood of the Son of God to His heavenly Father, which is why it is said, "Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father."

Our enablement is conditioned by our sharing in this Priesthood of Christ. Because we are baptized, we participate in the role of Christ, the High Priest; we are thus able to be victims with Jesus - victims like Jesus as man, but victims for Jesus who is God. This is the priesthood about which Saint Peter wrote. We should recall the first Pope reminding the faithful that they share in Christ's royalty because they share in His capacity for sacrifice; our King is a crowned King indeed, but crowned on earth with a crown of thorns. That is the kind of priesthood that we are all privileged to participate in. While the fact of sharing in this priesthood is an article of our faith and made possible by our Baptism, the degree of this participation, its intensity, and its fruitfulness for the good of our souls and the souls of others, depends on the willingness with which we are co-offerers and especially co-offered with the Savior.

It is almost too ambitious for words to try to exhaust the meaning of the priesthood. My first recommendation, therefore, is to spend much more time than perhaps what we have been doing in meditating on the priesthood. Where can we find material from which we can gain deep insights on God's revealed wisdom regarding the priesthood? First of all, read the letter to the Hebrews. In any case, the thirteen chapters of the letter to the Hebrews are the most exhausting revelation we have on the meaning of Christ's Priesthood and of our share in that priesthood.

Secondly, look into the teachings of the Church. Here I would especially single out "Mediator Dei" of Pope Pius XII on the

sacred liturgy. There are many beautiful and profound things about the priesthood in general in this document. There is an especially clear distinction between the priesthood of the ministry (those who are ordained) and the priesthood of all the faithful, with a long, elaborate explanation of how we faithful might more effectively live out our own baptized priesthood.

The priesthood is indeed important; without it there is no Church. Needless to say, the priesthood is challenged. The late Pope Paul VI more than once said that never in the history of the Church has the priestly office been more attacked than today. Hence, if ever the priesthood needed support—of the priests, first of all, of their fellow-priests, and of all the faithful through prayer and sacrifice—it is today.

Consequently, not merely knowing about the priesthood, but praying and offering God sacrifices for the priesthood are indispensably important in our day. Undoubtedly God is allowing the shepherds to be struck and thus the sheep to be scattered. May we offer our petitions and pains to God that He might have mercy on His people by restoring His priesthood to that dignity, that importance, that respect, and that multitude of ministers of the Gospel and the sacraments, without which, as we now sadly see, millions are literally wandering about as sheep who are lost because they do not have those who, under God, should help lead them back to Him.

Copyright © 1998 Inter Mirifica

May we offer our petitions and pains to God that He might have mercy on His people by restoring His priesthood to that dignity, that importance, that respect, and that multitude of ministers of the Gospel and the sacraments, without which, as we now sadly see, millions are literally wandering about as sheep who are lost because they do not have those who, under God, should help lead them back to Him.

Journeying with the Lord in the Breezes of Grace

Rev. Fr. Peter Zhang Siqian, C.D.D.



The Greek philosopher, Socrates, once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” After looking back and reflecting on my seemingly ordinary life, I realized that it is not out of pure coincidence that I exist. I see the grace of God at work in each and every one of my daily encounters. I am now going to relate a few of these encounters, and in so doing, give thanks to God for His countless blessings and bear witness to His love. I also hope that my vocation story will inspire young men who are discerning a priestly vocation, and give encouragement to my fellow brother-priests.

Baptism and Confirmation

I was born in a Catholic family. God has chosen me before my birth. It was certainly through God’s grace that I was chosen from among billions of people in China. As I was born during the Cultural Revolution, during which there was no way to get hold of a priest to administer the sacraments. Hence, my devout father baptized me at home. Since the baptism was done in private, I did not have any certification for baptism. It was only 25 years later when I finally received my “Certificate of Baptism and Confirmation”. The certificate was hand-written by Rev. Fr. Joseph Mi, C.D.D, and bore the signature of Archbishop Matthias Pei Shangde, C.D.D, dated 26 October 1996: “This certifies that Zhang Siqian, Christian name: Peter, was baptized by his father within two

months after his birth. The baptism was witnessed by his mother, and is certified to be valid... On 15 August 1991, Peter was administered conditional baptism, and his Godfather is John Zheng Xuecai... Peter received his first Holy Communion and was confirmed on 2 October 1981.” The Certificate of Baptism and Confirmation was given in retrospect by the Church as it was convinced of the authenticity and accuracy of the events which were carefully recorded in a much-treasured little diary of my household, in which all the important events of my family members were clearly recorded.

Notebooks of Prayer

Although I am a cradle Catholic, I was not a “church goer” when I was young. However, it was not my choice. During the Cultural Revolution, churches were converted to warehouses or school auditoriums. Although there were no public liturgical celebrations, my parents were very stringent about prayer life at home. On some occasions, we enjoyed praying together as a family at night, but most of the time, we prayed individually. Our knowledge of prayer was very limited. The prayers we recited most often were the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. (I only learnt how to recite the Holy Rosary when I was in middleschool. I could still remember the day when my father taught us how to recite the Rosary. That day, my father returned home with a schematic diagram depicting

a Rosary and how it is to be recited. With the diagram as a teaching aid, my father taught us how to recite the Rosary with great joy and excitement, as if he were navigating through a treasure map.)

For our family prayers, my father would usually decide on a prayer intention and the whole family would offer up the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be for that intention. We will pray for that particular intention till we have reached 10,000 times of the three said prayers respectively. After completing our prayers for one intention, we would then choose another intention to pray for. In order to keep track of the number of prayers we have recited, and in order to encourage one another, we would write the number of prayers we recited during the course of the day in a record book every night before we went to bed. Each page of the record book had five columns with the date, name, number of “Our Father”, “Hail Mary”, and “Glory Be” prayers recited by that family member. Over the years, we have accumulated a thick stack of record books, with our names and our prayers written on each and every page. This was how my parents taught me the faith in those difficult years where priests were not allowed to exercise their ministry. One could say that my devout parents had established a domestic church in their household, through which I realized God’s grace is not restricted to the sacraments administered by the clergy.

God is More Generous than Man

In the late 1970s (when the Cultural Revolution just ended), a priest by the name of Fr. Vincent Li was given redress and was released from the correctional labor camp. On his way back to his home village of Xuanhua, Fr. Li needed to stop over in Beijing for a week. He tried contacting his relatives and friends from Beijing, but to no avail. People were probably afraid that they might be implicated if the authorities found out that they had connections with a Catholic priest. Back then we were living in extremely cramped and desperate conditions. The four of us had to squeeze into a small room of only 12 square meters, and we had to put my dear grandmother up in a simple hut that we constructed for her because there was no more space in our house. When my parents came to know about Fr. Li and his situation, they made a prompt decision by sending my grandmother to my aunt’s house, and brought Fr. Li over to our place that very night. My parents did not know Fr. Li personally; they

did that simply because he was a priest, Alter Christus. Although it was extremely hot and stuffy inside the hut, Fr. Li was very much at ease. On the day when Fr. Li left, my parents emptied half a jar of white rice grains into a bag and gave it to Fr. Li. That was all the rice we had at home. Hence, for the next 20 days, we had to eat unpolished sorghum daily. The sorghum scratched our throats, making us very uncomfortable. One might wonder why we didn’t buy some more rice. Back in the 1970s up till the early 1990s, apart from cash, one also needed ration coupons to purchase food supplies. Since we had used up our ration coupons for the month, we could only wait till the following month before we could purchase the essential food supplies.

What we did not expect was, after receiving Fr. Vincent Li and providing for his needs, our family shifted thrice, moving in to a larger house each time. Ever since, our family has always kept a spare room to accommodate friends who might stop over in Beijing. According to my mother, our family’s financial situation also started to take a turn for the better. Looking from a secular perspective, one could say that our improved living conditions were brought about by the favorable economic reform policies implemented by the government. However, from a Christian perspective, I would say that the Lord’s generosity cannot be superseded by that of any human person.

Joy Amidst Suffering

Another priest who was instrumental in sowing the seed of my vocation is Fr. Peter Zhang Jingzhi. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, many people were given redress, and among them was Fr. Zhang, who was released from the correctional labor camp. Fr. Zhang became a frequent visitor to our house. He would often come over to our place during festivities and other special occasions to organize prayer sessions. From time to time, Fr. Zhang would share about his experiences in the labor camp, in which he was imprisoned for more than two decades. He recounted how they were made to stand in ice-cold water to dig canals, causing their legs to swell like carrots; how getting up in the middle of the night to urinate outside the bunk made him the sole survivor of his bunk when an earthquake struck that very night; how he secretly did confession and heard the confessions of his fellow priests in the latrine; how he would freeze the 20 dumplings he received during Chinese New Year on



the window latch and slowly enjoyed consuming them for over a month... Even though his stories were rather repetitive – to the extent that I could anticipate the next sentence he was about to utter – yet I never grew tired of hearing them. It was not solely out of respect for my elders that I did not get bored of his stories. I noticed that whenever he related those legendary experiences, his face would become as radiant as the sun. More often than not, he would joke about himself – “Just look at my body with all those scars and stiches. My body is like a worn out bullock cart, and yet the Lord still wants this worn out cart to keep moving forward!”

Those long years spent in prison inculcated in Fr. Zhang a sense of open-mindedness and constant gratitude. “I sincerely thank the Lord for giving me this opportunity to do a prolonged retreat of over 20 years, free of charge! I could still recall those years before the Cultural Revolution, as a polyglot who could speak six languages fluently, I was appointed a priest coordinator and was placed in-charge of coordinating all foreign missionary activities in the diocese even before I reached the age of 30. I was so full of myself, and thought, ‘If I were not a little humpbacked, I would definitely become the Archbishop of Beijing...’ The Lord saw my swollen ego and overbearing pride and knew that my soul was in danger. That was when He gave me a tight slap and sent me into prison. During those days in the labor camp, there were only two words in my mind all the time – ‘God’ and ‘food’. My growling stomach reminded me that I had to rely solely on God. All vainglory and earthly desires vanished. I realized that the Lord loved me so much by blessing me with a talent for language learning. It was

because of my mastery of several languages that I was transferred to the translation department and could stop doing manual labor. If I had remained in the manual labor department, I would have died from exhaustion. Looking back in retrospect, being imprisoned turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I felt like I was being locked in a steel safe. Even though we did not have enough food to eat in the labor camp, I was sheltered from the over zealous Red Guards. If I was left outside, I would have been beaten to death by the Red Guards.”

After going through so much pain and suffering, and all those lost years of his youth, Fr. Zhang did not harbor any regrets or negative feelings. Instead, he was ever-grateful to God for everything. I was fascinated and deeply captivated by his perseverance and optimism, and this started me on my journey to seek out the source of strength and joy in life.

The Five-Cent Coin

During the 1980s, the Catholic Churches in Beijing were reinstated and were open for public worship once again. I lived in the parish boundary of St. Joseph’s Church, which is located on the busy Wangfujing commercial street. The parish is more commonly known to the locals as Wangfujing Church or Dongtang (literally, East Church). This awe-inspiring church was built in the Romanesque Revival style, featuring pilasters and three bell towers.

I started serving as an altar boy in St. Joseph’s Church in the early 1980s. I can still remember how we had to learn the responses for the Order of Mass in Latin, which

were being transcribed using Chinese characters that sounded alike. These responses made no sense to me at all. However, my memory power as a child was quite good, thus I managed to memorize all the responses after reading them out aloud a few times.

The parish church was six bus stops away from my house. Even though there was a bus stop right in front of the church, I could not understand why our family would alight one bus stop earlier and walk a few hundred meters to church early in the morning. It was fine walking to church on sunny days, but imagine having to walk against the direction of the harsh winter winds with our sleepy eyes! Whenever we reached the church, my mother would hand me and my sister a five-cent coin each to place in the offertory box after Mass. It took me a few years before I understood my mother's rationale for making us "walk the extra mile" every Sunday morning. Back then, the bus ticket cost 20 cents for the distance of five bus stops, and 25 cents for six stops. Alighting one stop earlier and covering the remaining distance on foot meant that we would each save up five cents. By doing that, we offered up our living sacrifice to the Lord.

Candlelight and Liberation

Whenever I see children going for Catechism classes and other parish activities, I admire them a lot. All throughout my school years, none of my classmates were Catholic. During that era when public opinion about religion was very negative (religion as the opiate of the masses), and coupled with my very limited understanding of the Catholic faith, I have never told any of my friends that I am a Catholic, not even my best friend. This was my "best guarded secret" from primary school all the way to college.

During college, I stayed on campus and felt that I was putting on a mask and led a double life. During weekdays when I was on campus, I would never talk to anyone about spiritual matters. The only spiritual activity was my private evening Rosary. After dinner, I would sneak to a quiet corner of the campus to recite the Rosary. However, when I returned home on weekends, I became a "model" Catholic. I would actively take part in my family prayers and faithfully serve Mass every Sunday. Leading a double life made me feel very gloomy and depressed.

One night during my second year in college, I was finally

liberated. That evening after dinner, there was a power failure. We all stopped our revision and returned to our dormitory, where we lit up candles and sat around playing cards and chatted with one another. Out of nowhere, one of my roommates asked me, "Are you a Catholic?" My goodness! How on earth did he know about this? Why is he asking me such a question! I gave a one-word reply – "yeah" – hoping for a chance to change the subject of our conversation. To my surprise, he continued asking me, "Does your Church have a Pope?" I looked around and noticed that, apart from him, no one else was listening, and so I nodded my head. "So, what is the Bible all about?" He seemed to have an endless list of questions. I was scratching my scalp as I answered his questions. While answering those questions, I was also praying that the Lord would give me wisdom. Not long after, I realized that, out of nowhere, all my seven roommates were crowding around me and listening to the conversation. The flickering flames of the candles were like the flames of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the faces of these people whose souls were thirsting for true knowledge. This was the first time I preached about my faith in public. I have stopped hiding behind a mask, and I felt extremely happy and liberated. The "journey of faith" lasted till midnight. Out of my seven roommates (two agnostics, one communist party member, four young pioneers of the Chinese Communist Party), six of them had a good impression of religion after our conversation. A few of them even felt that the Catholic faith was quite reasonable. It was so unbelievable! That very night, my heart was on fire, and I could not sleep.

In actual fact, the Chinese people need more opportunities to encounter the Gospel. The harvest is ready; all we need now are laborers to gather the harvest. From that night onwards, Zechariah's song of praise resounded in my head from time to time, "And you, little child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord – to prepare his ways." (Luke 1:76). I was no longer afraid to profess my Catholic faith in public.

Dilemma and Tears

When I was about to graduate from college, I had not told my parents that I was contemplating whether or not I should enter the seminary. This was because I was not certain if the Lord was really calling me to be a priest. Furthermore, my sister was studying overseas, and I am the only son in my family. In most Chinese families, sons

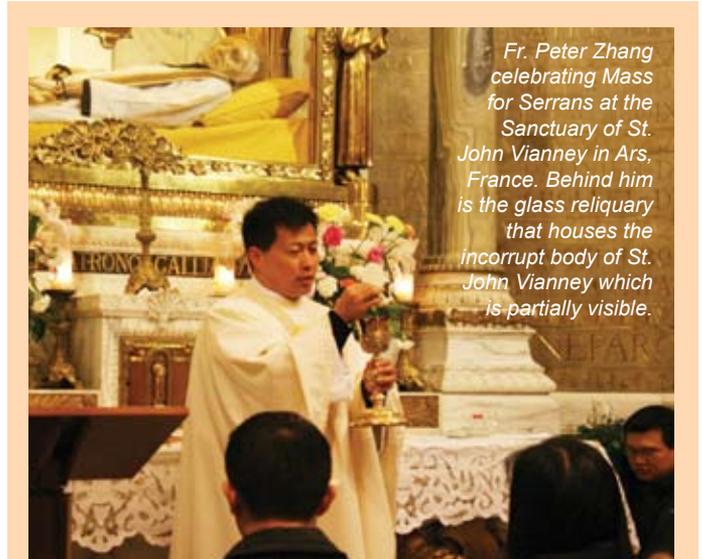
are expected to carry on the family name and support their parents in their old age. My parents led very frugal lives in order to support me financially and to pay for my school fees. Would they be upset if I left immediately to enter the seminary after graduation? I kept seeking for an opportunity to explain to my parents. It was my intuitive mother who sensed that I had something I wanted to tell her, and she became the first person to broach the subject. She came into my room and, sitting on my bed, she asked me softly and slowly, "Siqian, when you become an engineer, mum does not want to be a burden to you. All I want is to go to your office everyday where I can collect some scrap cartons in exchange for some pocket money. Would you grant my request?" As my mother had been a housewife all along, she did not have any retirement pension. How should I reply her? If I said "yes", I would have to go to the architectural firm to work and thus drop the idea of entering the seminary; however, on the other hand, I could not bring myself to say "no"; how could I reject such a simple request from my own mother! Furthermore, if I became a missionary priest, I was not sure if I could make ends meet myself, what more provide for my mother... I did not want to make empty promises, so I bowed my head and remained silent. Time was crawling. Each minute passed very slowly... My mother bowed her head and walked out of my room. My parents were people of great faith. Even though they were reluctant, they never uttered a word to discourage me from pursuing my vocation.

On the night before I left for the overseas seminary, my grandmother did not turn off the lights in her room for the whole night. She was knitting a string for my crucifix so that I could wear it on my neck. It was not complicated. However, as she was suffering from presbyopia, it took her one whole night to finish knitting the string. When my grandmother sent me off the following morning, she was leaning against the door frame, and was so overwhelmed that she was at a loss for words. When she placed the string in my hands, tears started streaming down her face. My mother said that was the first time she ever saw my grandmother cry. Even in those tough times in the countryside 40 years ago, where she had to labor herself by carrying rocks manually for the dam building project while raising four kids by herself, my grandmother endured every hardship without shedding a tear.

My mother's question and my grandmother's tears have left a lasting imprint in my heart. During my ordination

seven years later, I felt so relieved to see my parents' smiles. I have finally given my mother a satisfactory answer. I also believe that my grandmother is now wiping her tears of joy in heaven!

Looking back in retrospect, the grace of the Lord was like a gentle breeze, attracting me and guiding me each day to be His disciple and following closely in His footsteps, until the day when I see Him face to Face.



Fr. Peter Zhang celebrating Mass for Serrans at the Sanctuary of St. John Vianney in Ars, France. Behind him is the glass reliquary that houses the incorrupt body of St. John Vianney which is partially visible.

Rev. Fr. Peter Zhang Siqian, C.D.D. was born and grew up in Beijing, China. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from the Beijing University of Technology in 1996. Fr. Zhang joined the Congregatio Discipulorum Domini (Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord) afterwards and did his priestly formation at St. Francis Xavier Major Seminary, Singapore. He was ordained a religious priest at the Church of the Holy Spirit, Singapore, in 2003, by His Grace Archbishop (now Archbishop Emeritus) Nicholas Chia. After two years of pastoral work in Singapore, Fr. Zhang went on to do his graduate research at the Alphonsus Academy of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, Italy, and received his STD (Doctorate in Moral Theology) in 2011.

Currently serving as assistant priest in the Church of the Holy Cross, Singapore, Fr. Zhang also serves as the vice-general of his Congregation, and the vice-rector of the newly established Catholic Theological Institute of Singapore. He previously served as assistant priest at St. Anne's Church, Singapore, and the Cathedral of St. Stephen in Concordia, Italy. He has also worked as a program collaborator in the Chinese Section of the Vatican Radio.

“I knew I wanted to be a Diocesan Priest like this man”

**by Rev. Fr. Ryan Rooney
Parochial Vicar, Immaculate Conception Parish,
Holyoke, Diocese of Springfield, MA**



When I was 17, I was a young idealistic teen, just starting to figure out college plans, and getting as much extracurricular activity in as possible. I performed in a summer musical with a local community theater group, and was saddened when I found out that the last day of the show was when my youth group was heading up to World Youth Day in Toronto. Since I had a few solos, I couldn't miss the show, and I'd miss getting to see Pope John Paul II (JPII).

I already had stirrings of the priesthood since freshman year at a prestigious boarding school, but I also had a love for theater, much like JPII had when he was young. Yet when I saw the iconic meeting of the late pontiff with the world's youth, the suffering he endured just to be there, I thought, will I ever get the chance to see him? I was enamored then with the great example of this holy man.

God took care of my cancer so that I could be a priest

A few months later, I tripped down some stairs in my dorm and completely dislocated my knee. What was to be a year-long recovery was further complicated in the Spring by a diagnosis of Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Here I was, a senior, still figuring out the future, but now crippled and with cancer, on a hilly college-like campus. I thought, Lord, I think You've been calling me to the priesthood for four years now. If You want me to be a priest, I know You will take care of this. Four months of chemotherapy and two weeks of radiation later, I was in remission.

Franciscan or Diocesan?

Partway through the Spring semester of 2004, when I was healthy enough, I showed up at the hilly campus of Franciscan University of Steubenville, still on crutches, but with a sense of purpose. I entered the Pre-Theologate Program, and began to solidify the idea that God was indeed in charge and calling me to a life of service as a priest. I did not know where that would take me. Would I be a Franciscan?

A year later, I travelled with 170 other students to Austria for a semester abroad. In February that year, we made a pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi, Italy. I was excited. Perhaps this would be the chance to see JPII for the first time? We arrived for the first Sunday Angelus that JPII unfortunately missed due to his increasing illness. We went and prayed

in the chapel of the Gemelli clinic and sang songs for him outside the window there.

The Connection I felt to the Bishop of Rome

We continued on our way to Assisi, where I was figuring to receive some divine sign that I was called to the Franciscans. I honestly felt nothing there; no ounce of prayer gave me that connection to St. Francis that I wanted. Just a month later I returned to Rome for Holy Week. That Easter Sunday was beautiful in St. Peter's Square, and the last time John Paul would deliver his Urbi et Orbi blessing. I had an obstructed view of the window, when I saw the white cap and the hand of the great Pope struggling to make the sign of the Cross over the crowd. John Paul was so frail, he could not speak, and so Cardinal Sodono, the celebrant of the Mass, had to read it for us as the world looked on during this captivating moment. I stared intently, realizing that this was the connection I was looking for in Assisi. It wasn't to Francis, but to the Bishop of Rome, the Diocese. This was a simple moment of clarity, I knew I wanted to be a Diocesan priest like this man.

I was interviewed by the Catholic News Service shortly after the great spectacle had ended. I was asked, "what do you pray for John Paul?" I answered, "My prayer is not so much for him, but for the world to see who he is: the Vicar of Christ on earth. His being at the window, being present says so much. He loves us so much that even though he is suffering, he comes to the window."

God's grace is sufficient

As I look back now, two years into my priesthood, I reflected on all the suffering I've endured and I know that it was for a purpose. I look also to the suffering of this great Saint of the Church, to his example which has inspired so many like me. I look at the challenges that face the priesthood, the nitty-gritty stuff that seminary can't teach a candidate, and I remember my fledgling faith, that the same grace which made me a priest of Jesus Christ, which made John Paul the Great a Saint, which calls young men to the priesthood, the same grace amidst any obstacle of suffering, can get us through. Now my prayer is to John Paul II, that I may be a holy priest, and that others may heed that great call.

John Paul II, pray for us.

Serra International and the Congregation for the Clergy

The Sacred Congregation for the Clergy (*Congregatio pro Clericis*) is the congregation of the Roman Curia responsible for overseeing matters related to priests and deacons who do not belong to any religious order. It is responsible for the legislation governing presbyteral councils and other organizations of priests around the world and handles requests for dispensation from active priestly ministry. It is also in charge of regulating Catholic seminaries all over the world.

The Episcopal Advisor to Serra International is Francis Cardinal George, the Archbishop of Chicago. Prior to 2013, Serra International was aggregated to the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education and the Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations in 1951. This was the Holy See's affirmation of Serra's role as a worldwide lay organization committed to the vocation ministry.

On 16 January 2013, the responsibilities for seminaries in the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities (later called the Congregation for Catholic Education), the congregation to which Serra International was aggregated by Pope Pius XII ON 3 May 1951, was transferred to the Congregation for the Clergy by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's motu proprio [Ministorum Institutio](#). Consequently, the Prefect of the congregation to which Serra is aggregated also changed from Zenon Cardinal Grocholewski to Mauro Cardinal Piacenza.

This means that Serra International is now aggregated to the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, which also gives the Serra apostolate a clearer focus as one that promotes and supports priests and priestly vocations.

A Brief History of the Congregation for the Clergy

The Congregation for the Clergy was originally set up as the *Sacra Congregatio Cardinalium pro executione et interpretatione concilii Tridentini interpretum* (Sacred Congregation of the Council) by Pope Pius IV in the apostolic constitution *Alias Nos* of 2 August 1564. Its initial role was to ensure a correct interpretation and the practical observance of the norms issued by the Council of Trent. Over time, the task of interpreting the canons of the Council of Trent ceased and the Sacred Congregation of the Council was eventually renamed "Congregation for the Clergy" on 31 December 1967 by Pope Paul VI.

The competence of the Congregation for the Clergy is divided among three Offices:

(Extracted from the Roman Curia: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_pro_31051999_en.html)

1) The Office for the Clergy collects, suggests and promotes initiatives with regard to the sanctity and the intellectual and pastoral updating of the Clergy (Diocesan Priests and Deacons), as well as their ongoing formation. It oversees Cathedral Chapters, Pastoral Councils, Presbyteral Councils, Parishes, Parish Priests and all clerics with regard to whatever pertains to their pastoral ministry etc., the matters of Mass offerings, Pious Foundations, Legacies, Oratories, Churches, Shrines, ecclesiastical archives and libraries. It also seeks to promote a more adequate distribution of the Clergy all over the world.

2) The Catechetical Office provides for the religious formation of the faithful of all ages and states of life. It issues appropriate norms so that catechetical teaching is imparted in a suitable fashion. It ensures that catechetical formation is properly executed. It grants the prescribed approvals for national Catechisms and Directories. It assists catechetical offices and follows initiatives regarding religious formation and international events dealing with such issues. It coordinates activities and offers their help if necessary.

3) The Third Office is competent in matters of the regulation and administration of ecclesiastical goods belonging to public juridic persons. It also grants the necessary permissions for the juridical negotiations mentioned in canons 1292 and 1295. Moreover, it supervises matters pertaining to the adequate income and social necessities of the Clergy such as disablement, old age and medical care etc.

Fast Facts on the Congregation for the Clergy

- *First set up as Sacra Congregatio Cardinalium pro executione et interpretatione concilii Tridentini interpretum on 2 August 1564 by Pope Pius IV.*
- *Renamed Congregation for the Clergy on 31 December 1967 by Pope Paul VI.*
- *Prefect: Mauro Cardinal Piacenza*
- *Secretary: Archbishop Celso Morga Iruzebieta.*
- *Undersecretary: Monsignor Antonio Neri.*

Reference:

"Congregation for the Clergy". *The Roman Curia*. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_pro_31051999_en.html



Rev. Fr. Paul C. Hoelsing

Vocation Director, Archdiocese of Omaha, USA

Do you have a regular program (e.g. Vocation talks, retreats, etc) that serves as a platform to attract new aspirants? If yes, could you please describe what this program is?

Yes, I am currently also the Director of Campus Ministry and Chaplain to our FOCUS* teams in Omaha. I have regular outreach to a large network of college students.

We also have a well established Totus Tuus program in the Archdiocese. Over the past five years, it has been very fruitful for me to be involved in the formation of our teachers for that summer catechetical program.

Finally, we have two discernment retreats during the course of the year. Our Quo Vadis retreat will permit young men to interact with seminarians and receive formation in prayer.

Editor's note: FOCUS refers to the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, a college campus outreach program.

How often do you meet the aspirants on a one to one basis for direction and how long does each session last?

The needs of each aspirant are unique to the man. There is no set program. I generally follow the rule of thumb for spiritual direction – one hour per month. With a serious candidate the Lord can make things very clear, very quickly.

What are the most common fears shared by the aspirants in their discernment process? How do you help them dispel these fears?

Some are very practical:

- “What are the expectations of the Archdiocese if I become a seminarian?”
- “Is there financial burden?”
- “Do I become a burden to the Archdiocese if I do not become ordained?”

Others are more spiritual:

- “How will I know if the Lord is calling me?”
- “Will I ever have clarity?”

- “What if I do not discern well enough?”
- “What if the Lord is asking me to do something I cannot do?”

Note how many of these fears come from a lack of information (practical) or lack of faith (a bullying desolation).

Fears are always a joy.

From your experience, what is the percentage of aspirants that made it to the seminary and are subsequently ordained as priests (if applicable)?

Around one-third of those who enter college seminary are eventually ordained. Around half or more of those who enter after college are eventually ordained.

In your opinion, what are the key attributes of a Vocation Director?

- Prayerful: Vigorous interior life of relating all of his lived experiences to Jesus.
- Wise: Always receptive to what Jesus desires to reveal about a candidate or seminarian.
- Hopeful: Always living in certainty that Jesus' power is greater than his own.

Have you ever had to tell a young man under your direction that he does not have a priestly calling? Are there any particular signs that may indicate that an aspirant may not have a calling?

Yes. Again, the signs are unique to the person.

However, I am fond of Cardinal Francis George's three-pointed questions:

1. Can this man receive the gift of celibacy?
2. Is this man a narcissist?
3. Can this man govern?

If any of these are a “maybe”, then serious reconsideration should be made.

Background Information:

Number of Years as Priest: **11**

Number of Years as Vocation Director: **6**

Number of young men (“aspirants”) discerning with you and their average age group: **29 men; Average Age: 27**



Rev. Fr. Tim Hepburn

Vocation Director, Archdiocese of Atlanta, USA

Do you have a regular program (e.g. Vocation talks, retreats, etc) that serves as a platform to attract new aspirants? If yes, could you please describe what this program is?

Our program changes from year to year: there are usually events that are broad and simply introduce the idea of a “calling” and “discernment”. Then there are more focused offerings like the Quo Vadis young men’s retreat, discernment retreats for men over 18, vocations Masses for all who are praying about God’s calling (usually once a month), and Andrew dinners* where the Archbishop shares his vocation story.

Editor’s note: See boxed article on what Andrew dinners are.

How often do you meet the aspirants on a one to one basis for direction and how long does each session last?

Several times, usually for an hour.

What are the most common fears shared by the aspirants in their discernment process? How do you help them dispel these fears?

The general question of how they can know God’s will. The challenges that become more pronounced when they contemplate the possibility of perpetual, binding, promises like vows, celibacy, marriage, obedience. “What if I am not happy?” is a common question. Sometimes it helps if they realize that the option in life is not whether to commit or not, but what to commit to. I try to reassure aspirants that God’s Word; His promises are the solid rock, worthy of lifelong commitment.

From your experience, what is the percentage of aspirants that made it to the seminary and are subsequently ordained as priests (if applicable)?

50%

In your opinion, what are the key attributes of a Vocation Director?

He has to believe that Jesus Christ is alive and still calling men and women to become disciples and walk in the vocation that God has for them. It is not just Catholic culture calling, not just family tradition, but the Lord Himself. If this is not the key, a vocation director can become a career coach. Related is the attribute that the vocation director must pray and, from prayer, come to experience the mysteries of the faith in his or her life.

Have you ever had to tell a young man under your direction that he does not have a priestly calling? Are there any particular signs that may indicate that an aspirant may not have a calling?

I have had to tell many that I don’t see this calling, but even if I do not accept them I usually do not give a definitive judgment on their calling because I may be wrong. As to particular signs: some are obvious impediments. The most common negative sign that I see is that many have a notion of the priesthood but they have never encountered the Lord. They see it more like enlisting in the army. Still, I am careful here because the Lord called a few to be disciples who were not initially convinced about who He was, and some of those turned out to be true disciples.

WHAT IS AN ANDREW DINNER?

Andrew Dinners give priests an opportunity to invite young men, who they think has the qualities needed to be a good priest, to have dinner with a Bishop in their area in a relaxed atmosphere. It gives the young men a chance to ask questions and learn more about the life of a priest and to hear vocation stories from the Bishop, priests and seminarians. It also gives the Bishop a chance to interact and encourage them to follow the Lord’s call.

WHY IS IT CALLED ANDREW DINNER?

An Andrew Dinner is named after St. Andrew, who in the Gospel according to John, brought his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus. All priests are asked to notice qualities in young men that would be good in a future priest and to encourage them to listen for God’s call to the priesthood.

WHAT DOES AN ANDREW DINNER INCLUDE?

The evening begins with a meet and greet among the bishop, priests and other young men. It is followed by saying Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours and Dinner. The evening is an opportunity to hear vocation stories and ask questions.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Aspirants will be sent a monthly e-newsletter about events and topics that might help them to continue to think about a call to the priesthood. Depending on one’s age and interest in finding out more about the priesthood, aspirants will be invited to other events.

Extracted and adapted from www.chicagopriest.com

Background Information:

Number of Years as Priest: 20

Number of Years as Vocation Director: 2

Number of young men (“aspirants”) discerning with you & what is their average age group: 44 men, Average Age: 32



Christopher Peschel

**IV Theology, Diocese of Fall River
St. John's Seminary Brighton, MA**

When was the first time you thought about discerning a possible call to the priestly vocation? What was it

that led you to start discerning your vocation?

The first time I ever considered a call to the priesthood was shortly after receiving First Holy Communion. I had been at a Catholic grammar school where the priests were very involved in our day-to-day goings on. We attended Mass regularly and I became an altar boy as soon as I could. Much of my time as a grammar school student revolved around my parish. The thought of priesthood did escape my mind for several years, however, and it wasn't until my senior year of High School that I seriously considered it again.

I had been asked by a priest if I had ever thought about it, I mentioned that it had been quite a while since it was on my mind. Nonetheless, the serious discussion had begun. I found it to be quite helpful to talk to my parish priests about it. They guided me and also were able to introduce me to some of my diocese's seminarians. I appreciated their friendship and willingness to assist my own discernment through things as simple as answering questions about seminary life to suggesting prayers and pious practices that would assist spiritual growth in the midst of discernment.

Did you have a spiritual director helping you with your discernment? If yes, how often do you meet up with your spiritual director and/or vocation director? If no, what was stopping you from discernment with a vocation director?

I didn't have a spiritual director per se until I went to college. However, I would meet regularly with my parish priest which greatly assisted my discernment. When I was in college I entered a structured discernment program that required us to find a spiritual director. I met every three weeks or so with my spiritual director, a Franciscan Friar, who encouraged me to apply to seminary. During my senior year of High School and on my breaks from college I did meet with my Diocesan Vocation Director. I would maybe see him once a month. He was very helpful in putting some of my nervousness at ease and was a tremendous aid to me during the application process.

What were some of the concerns that arose during your discernment process that were preventing you from entering the seminary?

I remember asking myself, "What would my family think? How would my friends react?" Being from New England

and entering the seminary five years after the sexual abuse scandal broke, the priests were not exactly the most envied of people. I wondered if I would have the perseverance necessary to stick with it amidst the hostility I might find. I also questioned whether I could ever be holy enough to do the real spiritual work that a priest does. I didn't know, fresh out of High School and a year of College if I could embrace the celibate state for the rest of my life. I realized that being a priest was going to involve many real sacrifices and I was honestly concerned that I couldn't make them.

What sustained you in your discernment journey?

In the final months of my senior year of High School I was attending Mass daily, this practice continued through the summer and into my freshman year of college. I was thankful to attend a Catholic College, Franciscan University, where daily Mass was offered three times a day. When I was in High School my parish had a perpetual adoration chapel, which I liked to visit quite frequently to pray a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament. My parish priest also encouraged regular confession and praying of the rosary. When I received the Sacrament of Confirmation in 9th grade, I took the patron John Bosco. As I began discerning more seriously I came to learn that he had many dreams about the Church one of which was a very vivid image of the Church as a boat that was piloted by the pope and anchored between the two pillars of Mary and the Eucharist. I tried from that point on to model my own spirituality and discernment between those two pillars. Those practices assisted my discernment and have sustained me through seven years of seminary formation.

Did you know other like-minded young men who were also discerning their vocation? Did you all share similar struggles? How did you encourage and support one another in your discernment journey

I met some of the seminarians from the diocese through the priests that I was talking to. They invited me to join a discernment group, which was rather informal and met very infrequently, but I appreciated knowing that I wasn't the only person in the world thinking about becoming a priest. When I went to college I was in a discernment program that numbered about 65 members. I noticed that many of the big picture struggles and questions were very similar (lifelong commitment, holiness, celibacy, etc.) however, each man I met had their own story and their own unique struggles and questions. In college, we would meet twice daily to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in common and weekly we had fraternal discussion groups. These groups were very much an open forum and it became a means of supporting one another along the journey.



Juan Villegas

Juan was born in Michoacan, Mexico and moved to Chicago USA when he was 10 years old. He worked as a lay missionary for three years and then just in the past two years decided to take on the calling. He is a first year student at St. Joseph's College, Chicago's minor diocesan seminary.

When was the first time you thought about discerning a possible call to the priestly vocation? What was it that led you to start discerning your vocation?

Before my decision to enter the seminary, I spoke with my spiritual director, Fr. Charlie and told him that I was not called to be a priest. However, after a long talk with him, I felt that God was indeed calling me, and that I needed to look into discerning about the priesthood more closely. That was about three years ago. After a few events that happened in my life, I was looking to go back to school and while the priesthood was on my mind I had to be honest with myself and tell myself that the priesthood was something that I also needed to look into. So I searched for a school that I could possibly attend and at the same time, I also considered a few religious communities and the diocesan option.

What were some of the concerns that arose during your discernment process before you entered the seminary?

One of my concerns was my parents; I was afraid that I would not be able to look after them in their old age if I became a priest. The other concern was the feeling of not being worthy to be a priest. I always thought of a priest as one who has achieved the highest level of spiritual standards. And I really did not see myself having attained that. But we have to know that we are called to holiness and that we all need to achieve that one way or another, in our own way of following Christ and respond to the call of service and love. Some men are mainly called to serve the people of God in the priesthood. I'm sure that if you ask any priests if they feel worthy to be a priest they would say "no" but yet they can testify that the calling of God was strong

and evident in their lives and hence they had the courage to answer the call to be priests. As Jesus says, "... leave everything and come follow me." (cf Matthew 19:21) This phrase caused some concern. But know that if you leave everything you will be blessed with a lot more.

What sustained you in your discernment journey?

Spiritual Direction sustains my spiritual life. Receiving Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and praying in front of it also has been a great help in my discernment. Through all my struggles, it is always on my knees that I receive what I needed to stand again and again..... with the knowledge that God will always sustain me in the good and bad moments of my discernment process. The Divine Office is always His Word alive in my life; anyone who has prayed the Divine Office can testify to you that it becomes part of you when you pray it every day. My devotion to Mary has always sustained me even now in the seminary. Turn to Mary when you need a little push (in the right direction). She is always available to listen to our needs and go to her Son to ask Him to help us in our journey.

Do you know other like-minded young men who are also discerning their vocation? Do you all share similar struggles? How do you encourage and support one another in your discernment journey?

Yes, I do know of more young men who are discerning their vocation. We have the same struggles but in different moments in life. Having brothers who understand our way of living is always helpful because we can share our lives and support and help each other.

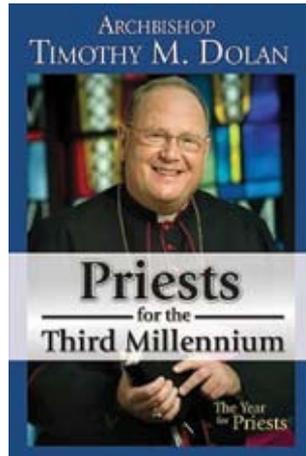
Priests for the Third Millennium

by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan

334 pages

Publisher: Our Sunday Visitor

First published on
1 September 2000



Archbishop Dolan (Timothy Cardinal Dolan) clearly sets forth what it takes to be a Catholic priest in the Third Millennium. He speaks frankly about the very tough issues priests face today, offering practical, Christ-focused solutions to problems. The book was written when Archbishop Dolan was the Rector of the Pontifical North American College in Rome. He spent many years training priests; this is a comprehensive book every priest should read to prepare for the years to come.

Whether he is stressing the necessity of regular Confession and the need to celebrate daily Mass and say the Liturgy of the Hours or discussing priestly celibacy in frank, realistic terms, he emphasizes true priest identity by presenting a life worth living, a life worth sharing, a life worth offering up to the Father through Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Pastoral, practical, and thoroughly Catholic, **Priests for the Third Millennium** will renew the joy of being Catholic in the heart of seminarians, priests, and the people they serve.

“So much of this book will encourage and benefit those who have already been ordained and are living the priesthood, striving to serve God’s people in holiness of life. A large part of the volume treats and bears witness to the universal call to holiness, as it is so insistently promoted by the Second Vatican Council.” - Justin Cardinal Rigali

The Identity of a Priest

(An extract of Priests for the Third Millennium by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan)

Most of you know the inspirational story of St. Maximilian Kolbe, but I trust that you, like me, never tire of hearing it. Recall that fateful day at Auschwitz when the Nazi prison guards assembled the concentration camp inmates in rows, and, at the commandant’s order, randomly chose ten helpless men for execution in retaliation for a recent escape. Remember how one of those chosen, a husband and father, cried out to be spared death for the sake of his family. Picture the stillness when Father Kolbe spoke up, “I wish to take the place of that man.”

Imagine the sneer of the commandant as he asked, “Who is

that Polish swine?” And recall again the reply of Maximilian Kolbe: “I am a Catholic priest.”

“Who are you?” snickered the commandant! Father Kolbe did not reply:

- I am Maximilian Kolbe . . .
- I am a Pole . . .
- I am a human being . . .
- I am a friend of his ...

His response was simply and humbly: “I am a Catholic priest.” In the eyes of God, in his own eyes, in the eyes of God’s Church and his suffering people, Maximilian Kolbe’s identity was that of a priest. At the core of his being, on his heart, was engraved a nametag, which marked him forever a priest of God. That identity could not be erased by the inhuman circumstances of a death camp, or the godless environment of Auschwitz, or by the fact that Father Kolbe was hardly “doing” the things one usually associates with priestly ministry, or that the people around him had mostly lost any faith or recognition of the supernatural they may have had before they entered that hell hole.

That identity hardly depended upon the acclaim of those around him or was lessened by the doubts and crisis he may personally have experienced in such a tortured setting. That identity came from God, and was imbedded indelibly within, born of a call he had detected early on from the Master to follow him, and sealed forever by the sacrament of holy orders. So conscious was he of his priestly identity that he could boldly answer the sneer of the Nazi commandant and simply state what he knew to be the central fact of his personal definition, “I am a Catholic priest.”

“The priest,” we read in the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis) from the Second Vatican Council, “shares in the authority by which Christ himself builds up, sanctifies, and rules his Body. Therefore . . . the sacerdotal office . . . is conferred by that special sacrament through which priests, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are marked with a special character and are so configured to Christ the Priest that they can act in the person of Christ the Head” (No. 2).

The priesthood is a call, not a career; a redefinition of self, not just a new ministry; a way of life, not a job; a state of being, not just a function; a permanent, lifelong commitment, not a temporary style of service; an identity, not just a role.

We are priests; yes, the doing, the ministry, is mighty important, but it flows from the being; we can act as priests, minister as priests, function as priests, serve as priests, preach as priests, because first and foremost we are priests! Being before act! Agere sequitur esse, as the Scholastics expressed it. Father William Byron, the former president of The Catholic University of America, is fond of saying that “we are human beings, not human doings, and our basic dignity and identity comes from who we are, not what we do.” This is true as well of the priesthood.